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The Patriarchal Narratives in the Light of Today

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

1939

By

OTHA L. CLARK

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The Patriarchal Narratives in the Light of Today

OTHA L. CLARK

Myth and Folklore In The Stories.—It is now known that myth, folklore, and history are not mutually exclusive. No longer is it necessary to be caught on the horns of the dilemma of either myth or history in regard to the patriarchal narratives. Through the years of transmission these elements may become inextricably mingled in the same body of tradition. In his book, "An Introduction to Mythology," Lewis Spence shows by use of the story of Brounger, an old fisherman who at one time resided at New Haven, how an old sea-god was gradually brought down to the human plane and his myth made the story of a fisherman. Albright has called attention to the example of Hassan and Hussein who became the heirs of Tammuz in the Shiite East.[1] Thus we see that in folklore heroes may take the place of deities. From instances of the deification of heroes, e.g. Alexander the Great, we are familiar with the phenomenon of the elevation of historical persons to the plane of deity and the mingling of myth and history in the records which touch upon those persons. In the opinion of Gunkel, the chief way by which the folklore of Israel has come down to us is by becoming bound up with historical recollections and so transformed to legend.[2]

In patriarchal times there was a common basic culture underlying all the Near East. Commerce and conquest, travel and migration made for the exchange of ideas and a general cultural unity. Myth was the religious story of that ancient time. Mythical poems were being written on tablets in Babylonia, and as we know from the Ras Shamra mythological texts the same was taking place at ancient Ugarit in Syria. To assume that the Hebrew tradition, then in its most plastic state, developed without partaking of some of the elements of its environment would be very strange indeed. Some of the more popular myths, at least in part, doubtless gravitated to the patriarchal figures. In his article "The Evolution of the Joseph Story," Dr. Herbert May suggests that there the historical recollections of the Joseph tribe have been superimposed upon an old myth of a nature deity of Shechem.[3] Some have tried to show how a myth about a battle between two gods became the story of Jacob's struggle at the ford of the Jabbok. There is, to be sure, difference of opinion about this. The evidence is insufficient, but as the story now stands a natural and reasonable explanation is that this is the sort of story that would be told about a hero or tribal father who entering a new land must vanquish the numen or *el* of the place. Here and there in the narratives are fragments and motifs which may well have come into the tradition from mythology, but without more evidence as an aid to determining the historical elements present it is most difficult to dogmatize. In the matter of differentiation between history and myth where we have them fused in the finished, beautifully polished stories of the Hebrew Fathers, one is on very difficult ground. As the mythologist looks for mythical motifs, he will probably err and be carried away on the wings of his imagination. Likewise, he who searches for points of agreement with the historical background will fail to take full account of chance coincidence and so fall into error even as the mythologist has done. This may be illustrated by the story of Isaac who was at the point of being sacrificed when a substitute was provided. Woolley[4] believes this is to be a historical account because it is consonant with

what is known of Sumerian and Canaanite or Bedouin custom. He fails to take into account some other very important criteria. If he did so, he would doubtless see that this story meets one of the first tests of myth or folklore—the test of repetition. It is similar to the Iphigenia legend and this type of story of someone who was almost sacrificed was told in many places where rites were practiced in which a substitute took the place of the human sacrifice.

Adolphe Lods asserts that folklore was more freely used by the people among whom the patriarchal narratives grew up than were historical incidents. This seems quite evident from Gunkel's admirable treatment of the Jacob story.[5] In some particulars his analysis of the stories may be found faulty, but his work leaves little doubt as to the prominence of folklore in the narratives. It also appears that this is undoubtedly the oldest material in the stories.

Ethnic Representation And Historical Recollecton.—There are elements in the narratives which are ethnological in purpose and origin. Due to the Semitic conception of family and tribal solidarity the leader believed to be the father and founder of the tribe could be at the same time the personification of the group, and also an individual. No clear distinction was made between individual history and the history of the group and the degree to which the group is represented by the individual varies. Scholars are generally agreed that in origin and purpose the stories of the sons of Jacob are largely ethnic. The story of Jacob's death illustrates the transition from individual to tribal features in a short narrative. The story of the youth Shechem who was father of the city of that name and the victim of the vengeance of Simeon and Levi is clearly a tribal representation and is based on the actual historical event. The accounts of how Simeon lost his birthright and Judah's fusion with southern tribes are ethnological in character and rest on the histories of those tribes. Although in some few instances the degree of personification of the group is clear, in many instances it is not. The problem of when the patriarchs are tribes and when individuals must be solved for each story separately by means of improved literary analysis and additional external evidence. The principle underlying the theories of ethnological representation has abiding value. However, it must be applied carefully and not carried too far.

The Narratives And Historical Background. In order to show that external evidence confirms the historical value of the narratives many have tred to set the patriarchs within a known historical framework. The difficulties which arise are not a few. Woolley, authority on the archaeology of Ur, and E. O. James who examines the Old Testament in the light of anthropology, believe that Abraham and his father fit in the history of Ur in the period of Rim-Sin and Hammurabi. They are agreed on the same general historical background but their dating of the setting varies more than a century. For them the narrative reflects a certain historical period, but they are unable to hold the historical framework still long enough to fit in the narrative to the satisfaction of many students of the problem. Actually, most scholars reject the earlier background in Ur. Dr. Friedrich Schmidtke, together with others, sees in Abraham and his people a group of Habiru coming from Mesopotamia in the period of the fifteenth to the sixteenth centuries B. C.[6] Weinheimer presents a unique theory and still another historical setting in which, he says, the genuine Abraham really fits.[7] A. Jirku gives data which show the possibility of the early origin of the patriarchal tradition.[8] Dr. Albright has offered archaeological evidence to the effect that practically every town mentioned in the narratives has been found to have existed in the Middle Bronze Age. If this evidence could be taken at face value, it would witness to the his-

torical accuracy of the narratives. It is necessary, however, to note that this evidence rests largely upon surface exploration of mounds and is therefore not conclusive. On the other hand, this disagreement and uncertainty is not to be taken as conclusive witness that the narratives do not fit into a historical framework as a genuine element, but rather it shows a deficiency in data which permits the entrance of subjective elements.

As important as noting the agreement with the historical background, is the indication of conflict in the stories with known history. A striking conflict is the representation of the camel as generally domesticated. There are seventeen references in the 24th chapter of Genesis alone to the domesticated camel. Other references are found in Genesis 12:16; 30:43; 31:17, 34; 32:7, 15; and 37:25. For these stories we must admit a background in a period of general domestication of the camel. To archaeological knowledge, on the other hand, the camel first appears in cuneiform inscriptions and monumental representations about the eleventh century B. C. It appears that camel bones have not been identified in Bronze-Age deposits in Palestine and the camel is not mentioned in Egyptian inscriptions. Dr. Albright believes that the effective domestication of the camel cannot antedate the outgoing Bronze Age although sporadic domestication may go back several centuries earlier.[9] Another example of conflict is the representation of Abraham as contemporary with the Philistines (Genesis 26). When the archaeologist reconstructs the history of Israel with the aid of external evidence, he must point out that the sojourn and exodus were not actually as traditionally represented. All the tribes were not in Egypt. Again he must explain that the archaeological evidence for the Hebrew occupation of the Promised Land denies one tradition and supports another. The period of Israel's history for which we find the most definite and striking confirmation from outside is that of the monarchy preserved in the later historical books. The records of the earlier periods are confessedly different in origin and purpose. We cannot, therefore, carry the weight of this confirmation of a later period over to the records of earlier times. If we fail to find full confirmation for the accounts of the Exodus and Conquest in the books of Exodus and Joshua, we cannot claim confirmation for a still earlier period for which there is even less external evidence.

In the years when Higher Criticism occupied the center of the stage in Old Testament study, it is doubtless true that the skeptical attitude toward the historical worth of this literature was over popularized. Now viewing the course of development in the patriarchal narrative interpretation we see that recently there has been a swing back from the tendency to question the historical value toward the traditional view which maintained the full historicity of the accounts. It should be noted that much of the momentum of this swing back is reactionary, i.e., based upon sentiment rather than facts, and hence there is the accentuated danger of going farther in that direction than the evidence actually permits. There is no doubt of some general confirmation of the narratives by the external evidence, but the claim that archaeology supports the full historicity of the accounts is certainly most extreme. This over-stressing of archaeological confirmation can have very dire effects for the Bible in the popular mind. In time this over-stressing of evidence will be recognized as such and unhealthful reaction will follow. As S. A. Cook says, it is a sounder method to perceive that there is some recollection of actual events in the narratives than to attempt a premature combination of the contemporary archaeological evidence and the Old Testament evidence.[10]

Are The Patriarchs Historical Persons? The foregoing discussion has in a way suggested something of our answer to this question. Studies of the narratives have taught us more about their vicissitudes than their origins. It seems that a theory about the

origins of the patriarchs is something which at the present we are not prepared to prove. We are unable to say with certainty what they were originally. It may be safely said that the patriarchs were not originally deities. In the first place, the very early occurrence of the patriarchal names as personal and place-names although not actual evidence that the patriarchs were historical persons, is a witness that these were not the names of gods. However, this is not conclusive. In the case of the place-names, we know from the occurrence of several with *el* as an element that these are not exclusively derived from personal or tribal names. This does not apply to Isaac which name is unknown and the identification of Joseph-el though probable is uncertain.[11] Spence detected an old thunder god in Brounger who was represented in story as a fisherman living one time in New Haven. Aside from etymological evidence, Spence pointed especially to the fact that in a folk poem found in *Tales and Traditions of Leith* a song is sung to placate Brounger who appeared glaring through a window at a wedding ceremony. There are some passages in Isaiah, Jeremiah and the Psalms which may suggest that the fathers were revered and addressed at times as mediators, but there seems to be no trace of evidence that they were invoked and placated as gods.[12]

If the patriarchs were not deities, can we say that they are historical persons? Archaeology has as yet been unable to give a satisfactory answer. Dr. Olmstead of the Oriental Institute in Chicago is able to accept the heroes of the Trojan war as historical individuals because of the facts of the war and its antecedents which archaeology has established. He can find history in Joshua and Moses, but back beyond them there is only legend. That it is possible that the patriarchs were historical is not denied, but the affirmation of their historical existence must await further evidence.

The dilemma of the historicity or the non-historicity of the patriarchs has held the attention of scholars too long. Insistence on the basic importance of the historicity of the individual fathers for a study of Hebrew religion is not entirely necessary.[13] If something should be recovered of the historical patriarchs, it would be of small use in comparison with the value of understanding what the people who claimed them as forefathers wanted them to have been and believed they must have been.

Seen in the light of today the patriarchal narratives appear as a body of tradition with a long, long history. As this tradition passed through the ages it gained certain elements while other elements, non-essential (at least in the age when lost), were sloughed off. Thus it became a highly composite body of historical recollection mingled with, and variously related to, many elements of myth and folklore. As to the historicity of the patriarchs themselves further evidence will be awaited with interest; but in the meantime the question in suspense need not, and probably will not greatly affect our faith in the things for which Israel believed the Fathers stood.

[1]Albright, *Journal of Biblical Literature,* XXXVII (1918), 111.

[2]H. Gunkel, *Das Märchen im Alten Testament* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1921), p. 167.

[3]H. G. May, *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature,* XLVII (1931), 83-93.

[4]Sir Leonard Woolley, *Abraham: Recent Discoveries and Hebrew Origins* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1936), pp. 45 ff.

[5]H. Gunkel, *What Remains of the Old Testament,* trans. A. K. Dallas (London: Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1928).

[6]F. Schmidtke, *Die Einwanderung Israels in Kanaan* (Breslau: Frankes Verlag und Druckerei, 1933), pp. 7-58.

[7]H. Weinheimer, *ZDMG,* LXVI (1912), pp. 381 ff.

[8]Anton Jirku, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel* (Leipzig: Verlag Quelle und Meyer, 1931), p. 57.

[9]W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1940), p. 120.

[10]S. A. Cook, *The Old Testament: A Reinterpretation* (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, Ltd., 1936), p. 215.

[11]G. A. Barton, *Archaeology and the Bible* (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1933), p. 363.

[12]Isa. 51:1 f., 63:16, 65:4; Jer. 31:15; Ps. 24:6.

[13]Cf. E. A. Leslie (*Old Testament Religion,* p. 55), who insists on this importance of the historicity of the patriarchs.